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OF WESTS, QUESTS AND BULLWHIPS: GEORGE BOWERING'S *CAPRICE* RIDES THROUGH THE WESTERN GENRE

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George Bowering's novel *Caprice* (1987) generally conforms to the literary code of the western genre, although both its form and content surpass those of a typical western. This article will focus on the novel's departures from the western, particularly its deconstruction of the grand narratives of history and the related myth of the Wild West. It will do this through the introduction of multiple alternative histories and perspectives, in the form of fragmented narratives and diverse conceptions of time and place, addressing: the differentiation between American and Canadian myths of the Wild and Mild West respectively, which reflect the distinct ideologies and histories of inception of these bordering countries; the deconstruction of the western genre through postmodern play with western tropes, such as the concepts of cowboy, Indian, the West, guns, and violence; and its engagement in the metatextual play with history and narrative. The aim is to show that Bowering's *Caprice*—a parody of the western genre written on the cusp of Canadian postmodernism—functions as palimpsest of the new (Canadian) western.[1]

Keywords: western, cowboys and Indians, Canadian and US Wild West(s), metahistory, chronotopical and chronological approach, postmodernism, heterotopia

The year is 1889 and Caprice is on the trail of her prey through the North American West. For the past two years she has been tracking down Frank Spencer, the man who killed her brother over a bottle of whisky. She is closing in, and when she catches him she will exact justice the Western way.

George Bowering's *Caprice* begins, as westerns typically do, with the appearance of a rider on the Western horizon: the protagonist Caprice, who defies expectations, definitions and labels within the realm of the western genre. This divergence is already visible in the novel's opening paragraph, which broaches many questions that are elaborated upon later.

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In accordance with the western's conventions, the novel's first sentence describes the Western landscape:

> If you just had ordinary English eyes, you would have seen late-morning sun flooding the light brown of the wide grassy valley and making giant knife shadows where the ridges slid down the hillsides, free of trees, wrinkles made in a wide land that didn't seem to be in that much of a hurry. As usual in the summer there wasnt [*sic*] a cloud in the sky, and you could not be sure where the sun was because you didnt [*sic*] dare look up at that half of the sky. (Bowering 1987: 1)

In true western mode, this static depiction of the image of the clear-cut lines of the prairie landscape in bright sunshine is the "panoramic shot of the endlessly wonderful country" (Sisk 1987: 406) that is usually celebrated in westerns. However, the first clause, "[i]f you just had ordinary English eyes", requires the reader to adjust his/her expectations promptly, because the trope of Western landscape is not simply given, but immediately shown as mediated, subjective, and thus limited. If "ordinary English eyes" offer this view of the land and consequently of the story, what other eyes are there, and how are their perspectives different? From the outset, the reader is made aware that these English eyes do not see everything—their perspective is restricted, making their perception of the landscape quite unremarkable.

In contrast, the next paragraph introduces another set of eyes, "those famous Indian eyes", and if you have those you can "look down into the wide valley and see something moving, maybe a lot of things moving" (Bowering 1987: 1). It is these eyes with their keen vision that identify a rider on the horizon, whose apparition on the British Columbian Interior Plateau marks the beginning of the story in the time-honoured fashion of westerns. Throughout the novel these Indian eyes will provide a running and punning commentary of the actions of the whites in the valley. Later, other eyes will appear: ordinary eastern eyes (in the sense of the North American East, as opposed to the West), and golden eagle eyes, which have the broadest perspective and keenest eyesight. Different sets of eyes indicate different levels of seeing, which in turn expose different layers of narrative. for not only are there at least two different perspectives of the same landscape, but the Indians are shown to be more perspicacious focalizers than the whites because they "[know] what to look for" (128).[2] In most westerns, Indians

[2] The importance of perspectives through seeing and watching is a prominent feature in *Caprice*, on par with the importance of reading. For analyses of these features see Garrett-Petts 1992 and Kröller 1992.

are relegated to the roles of either silent figures or trusted sidekicks, but in *Caprice* they provide a broader critical and contextual framework to the white colonial narrative, exposing the very limited one-dimensionality of the white perception of Western space and North American history.

The narrator in the opening paragraph is second-person, extradiegetic, overt, creating a sense of orality and immediacy, and juxtaposing the official written history of the Canadian West with the oral histories of its particular localities. During the novel, the narrator switches between second-person overt and third-person narrator with zero focalization, creating a dynamic text in constant flux. What appears at first to be a formulaic beginning reveals itself as a plethora of different meanings and subversions of the genre, which serve to set up the "rhetoric of reading" (Garrett-Petts 1992: 556) for more perspicacious readers, whose "eyes [are] willing to read between the lines" (van Herk 2010: viii). In fact, "[t]he need for eyes that are more than ordinary is key to the novel" (viii). Bowering calls for eyes that will see through the grand narrative of white history and its "imperialist / racist / sexist agenda" (Kröller 1992: 84), so embedded in the stereotypical western, and will look instead for a new western that does not drown out other histories.

To further subvert the one-dimensionality of both generic westerns and white history which is hinted at in its opening paragraph, Bowering's *Caprice* does not follow a single storyline, but creates a rhizomic structure of various narrative fragments that need to be pieced together by the reader to uncover the story. Character subplots are narrated in indirect free style, with the strong ironic presence of the narrator, and include stories and comments from two Indians—the owners of those Indian eyes. The older teaches the younger, who learns about landscape and the ways of his and the white people. Then there are the stories of Caprice, formerly a poet living in Paris, now an avenger; her lover, the schoolteacher Roy Smith, a Nova Scotian who went West "with the hope of developing the Canadian nation" (Bowering 1987: 173); Luigi, an Italian born in Istria who has travelled the world but now works for a Chinese, a situation which positions him on the lowest rung of the Western social ladder; the Chinese Soo Woo, the boss-man of the Chinese settlement in a town in the British Columbian Interior Plateau; Gert, a whore with a heart of gold and a small son; the sad lonely boy with spectacles who befriends Caprice; British aristocrats and landowners who control the region's money, law, politics and power, and who exercise a very British way of life that includes foxhunting; the villain Frank Spencer, an American desperado who killed Caprice's brother, and plays a game of cat and mouse with Caprice until their final showdown;

his sidekick, French Canadian "Strange" Loop Groulx, who has his own altercation with Caprice; and the story of Cabayo, Caprice's Spanish stallion, a noble beast, who serves as an occasional focalizer in the novel.

Another group of subplots appears, providing historical, political and social contexts and marking the novel's critical engagement in the grand narrative of the Wild West myth. These subplots are intertwined with the former group, and include the processes of story-telling that transform the Western 'reality' of everyday life into the Wild West myth; the stories of Aboriginal and white settlements and the colonization of the British Columbian Interior Plateau; Indian residential schools; white and Native mythologies; differences in politics, policies, frames of mind, and setups between the US and Canada; and the shaping power of language.

In order to realize this complicated structure of multiple layers, perspectives, themes and storylines, Bowering employs the narrative strategy of tapinosis, which he defines as "a sneaky kind of rhetoric – it means the saying of very serious things in offhand language, in vernacular, even in slang" (Bowering 1985: 61).[3] Also termed "aleatory" (Garrett-Petts 1992: 559), this offhand style of writing, which casually mentions relevant and frequently suppressed events from Canadian history along with their far-reaching consequences, demands that the reader not settle for a passive reading of *Caprice* as a schematic western. Bowering's deconstructive approach to the western genre through tapinosis and narrative fragmentation allows him to conduct a postmodernist critical examination of the past as rendered by the white historians of the West, while playing with the form of the western genre. The result is a parody, understood as an "unmasking of dead literary conventions and establishing of new literary codes" (Hutcheon 1984: 38). It "develops out of the realization of the literary inadequacies of a certain convention", at once "a deviation from the norm and" inclusion of "that norm within itself as background material" (50). Accordingly, *Caprice* stays within the western genre, but expands its boundaries by subverting the assumed tropes of the western—such as cowboys and Indians, the central role of the cowboy, and male domination of the West—that render Western women and non-Anglo-Saxon peoples and ethnicities invisible. In this way, Bowering creates a new kind of western that questions the fallacies of the conventions and literary codes of the genre and replaces them with more adequate ones.

[3] Compare Garrett-Petts 1992: 559–561. Tapinosis, from the Greek word for "lowering", is defined as a "figurative device, expression or epithet which belittles by exaggeration" (Cuddon 1998: 902).

Thus Bowering produces a parody of the western genre, which functions on different levels. The central stereotype, simultaneously introduced and subverted in *Caprice*, is that previously mentioned, of "cowboys and Indians".[4] At first it appears as though Bowering has retained this classic terminology, as his central characters *are* cowboys and Indians. On closer inspection though, the stereotypes do not hold. With the character of Caprice, for example, he deconstructs the concept of the cowboy, and through it that of the West as a male domain. The cowboy is an icon and metonymy of the Wild West myth: an excellent horseman, a fast shooter with a sharp sense of justice, a nomadic figure with a trusty steed, possessing a certain mystique. He is a potentially dangerous stranger, his reputation a rumour, his future somewhere on the trail. The cowboy is opposed to civilization, enclosed spaces and regular working hours. He is "less about the winning and civilizing of the West … than about keeping it as a preserve for the unfettered male on his noble steed" (Sisk 1987: 402). The cowboy maintains the heterotopia of the West as a place that was "formed in the very founding of society", "something like a counter-site" to Eastern civilization, but transformed into a locale "in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1997: 332). The heterotopia of the Wild West survives through its maintenance of the cowboy as icon, and the status quo of the frontier as a chronotope in the western imagination. It is dependent on its own stasis and immutability, safe from the progress and constant change of the ever-evolving Eastern civilization.

In Bowering's novel, Caprice assumes the central role of the cowboy. Her iconic status is emphasized by the fact that, in keeping with the image of cowboy heroes, she has only a first name and no surname, unlike other more ordinary characters in the novel. In addition, her name means "a whim, a fancy" (van Herk 2010: v). She defies expectations from the outset: as the Indians slowly discern a rider on the horizon and as it becomes clear that

[4] The word "Indian" is used (instead of politically correct terms such as First Nations [Canada] and Native Americans [USA]) with full knowledge of its semantic and historical burdens, regarding the injustices, dispossession, marginalisation and genocide enforced by the white imperial politics in North America. Since Bowering uses the term "Indian" deliberately, with the intent of dismantling its racist and stereotypical use in the western genre, it is used here too, but always with an awareness of its meaning in a historical context. Additionally, a sociolinguistic decrease of respectability has occurred for the term "cowboy", due to its stereotyping in the Wild West mythology. Nowadays, the preferred terms are stock hand, or range hand.

it is a woman and not a man, a debate ensues regarding the appropriate term for such an unusual rider. She is described not as a horseman but a horsewoman, not a cowboy but a cowgirl, or perhaps a bullgirl, or a cowperson. The Indians test different labels, drawing attention to the inadequacy of language to describe such an unusual apparition. Like the majority of heroes in westerns, Caprice is not a cowboy in the strictest terms because she does not work on a ranch, but she conforms in another way: she has a past that is different to her present mission of retribution. The narrator pays much attention to her physical appearance: she is six feet tall in her boots, has freckles all over, large hands and strong thighs, red hair tied in braids. However, unlike the iconic figure of a cowboy, Caprice is not an excellent shooter, and does not even own a gun for most of the story. Instead, she has a coiled bullwhip at her thigh, and whips her way through the narrative. This bullwhip is European, marking another exotic element of her appearance.

A horse in a western has a character just as the hero does; in fact they share a certain "stalwart individualism" (Sisk 1987: 402). Caprice's horse Cabayo is as iconic as any: he is her partner on the quest, and her helper in the accomplishment of a difficult task, to use Propp's seven spheres of action, i.e. character-role terminology (1968). Even the fact that he possesses a name is an attestation to the partnership and intimacy of the heroine and her horse. In contrast, the villains do not care about their horses, seeing them only as a means of transport. This is exemplified by the actions of Loop Groulx, who spends considerable time abusing his interchangeable steeds. Caprice speaks to Cabayo only in Spanish terms of endearment, because he is from Spain, and endearments are the only words of Spanish she knows. Cabayo is tall and muscular, a magnificent purple-black, full-blooded stallion and as with Caprice, much attention is paid to his physique, emphasizing their presence in the stereotypical western landscape. Cabayo is as rare and unique as his mistress, and it is no wonder the Indians are at a loss to find an adequate term to describe them. As the younger Indian says to the older: "[y]ou should see her. She sits with her back straight and her hand on her upper leg. Not a bit of her bounces when the horse steps … She rides just like a man …She rides just like an Indian" (Bowering, 1987: 3). The gradation of praise is noticeable, from her riding like a man (not sitting sideways on the horse), to apparently the highest praise, that of riding like an Indian, a harmonious meld of man and beast.

As Caprice and her horse traverse the prairies together, they cut a striking figure, a unity of rider and horse, a Centaur (to borrow a term

from a different mythology). Georgiana Colvile claims that Cabayo has a symbolic function: since he is black, he represents "a sign of [Caprice's] bereavement" (Colvile 2009: 136) for her lost brother. He is also the collateral victim of her quest, dying from a bullet the desperado Loop Groulx intends for his mistress, in the shoot-out preceding the final resolution. After this showdown, where Caprice captures her brother's murderer and simultaneously saves the town, the citizens present her with a white Arabian stallion, Hisan, who may turn out to be a worthy replacement for Cabayo. She rides Hisan out of (her) western narrative.

The human-horse partnership is also necessary for the cowboy to live his wandering way of life. Typically, cowboys are migratory creatures, and this is a stereotype that Caprice follows. In her case, though, this trait is intermingled with the reversal of male and female roles in the West; normally the woman is static, a metonymy for the homestead, while the man migrates with the cattle herds. In *Caprice* the heroine claims the role of the itinerant cowboy whereas her lover, Roy Smith, argues in favour of settling down and renouncing the pursuit of Frank Spencer and vengeance for her brother's murder. Moreover, Roy Smith is a schoolteacher, so the reversal of western gender roles is complete. When at one point Roy suggests that Caprice settle down and become a teacher, she replies that that position is already filled by him; there are not so many archetypal roles for a woman in the West.

Usually in westerns the woman is marginally present as either a farmer's wife or prostitute, with an occasional schoolmistress thrown in the mix. The narrator explains, tongue-in-cheek, that "[i]n the wild west, where men were men and life was hard, women were supposed to be one of two things – commodities or prizes. Bad women… were the commodities, and went along with whisky and gambling" whereas "daughters of ranch owners were the principal prizes, because they were relatively virtuous… and likely to inherit land or stocks" (Bowering 1987: 183). There is a third group of invisible women, "the wives of homesteaders" who "were neither commodities nor prizes. They were, like anything that was likely to produce, used as devices to prepare the dream of a future" (183), a new society away from the East. Caprice does not fit any of these roles because she has already taken the prominent role of cowboy hero, nomadic bringer of justice to the West. In accordance with the western genre, Caprice stays true to her mission and once it is completed she leaves, not only the region but, typically atypical of her, the West entirely.

Having thus deconstructed the cowboy part of the 'cowboys and Indians' syntagm, Bowering also dismantles the western's pan-Indian concept of

'Indians' as one and the same people, which relies on the "popular European fantas[y] of the Native" (Joudrey 2010: 140). Bowering gives prominence to the Native presence in the Western landscape by framing the central narrative with a running commentary by the two Indians. He also has them discuss broader topics, such as the white settlement/invasion of the British Columbian Interior Plateau, and the different peoples and traditions on the North American continent. The method the older Indian uses to teach the younger one would, in the Western philosophy, be called Socratic, consisting of a series of questions and answers. The Indians' repartees seem very much to be attempts to outsmart one another, revealing the humour that underlies the Native conception of the world, and serving as a coping mechanism for the injustices suffered at the hands of colonizers.[5]

Bowering further explodes the stereotypical image of Indians in westerns by revealing the mistreatment of the First Nations by white settlers. An example of this is his apparently casual mention of the Indian residential school where Roy Smith works, an institution for enforcing assimilation of the First Nations through the eradication of their traditions and languages. Bowering mentions the ideological purpose of the school as a place where "the fifty children on loan from the reserves were given basic education" (Bowering 1987: 173), where the farmers' roles preordained for them by white colonizers would be imprinted on them. The ironic undertone is clear here, and one cannot escape the scathing intent as he describes these children "on loan from the reserves". This phrase barely masks the forceful abduction of children from their families and communities, a practice which lasted for over a century. Roy Smith does not believe that this method of turning the boys into farmers is successful: "[t]hose boys, he thought. We will never make farmers of them. We will never keep them alive that way", although he hopes that "on this side of the medicine line [US-Canadian border] we can teach them instead of killing them" (173). Indeed, the uncertainty of the First Nations' survival on the 19th-century North American continent weaves its way through the novel.

The concept of "the vanishing Indian" popular in the 19th century appears in several places in the novel, and specifically in photographer Archibald Minjus's conception of the photograph as "a shadow that speaks from dying lips" (99). As well as referencing the notion shared by various aboriginal nations that photography is a means of stealing a person's soul,

[5] For a first-hand analysis of the role of humour in First Nations cultures, see, e.g. Taylor 2000.

Minjus's definition recalls the vanishing Indian myth and the fashion of "capturing" Indians in their natural environment. It also alludes to the work of American photographer Edward S. Curtis, famous for taking thousands of photographs of Indians in staged poses and scenes, all of which explored the notion of the extinction of the weaker race. Curtis's photographs were nostalgic, melodramatic and made to look as if they were portraying a past that had already occurred.[6] In a similar vein, Archie Minjus wants to make photographs that invent "the west as it disappear[s] into the past" (147), in order to emphasize the disappearance of the last frontier and the Western wilderness and, with it the disappearance of Indians. Driving the point home, Minjus feels that each time he "opens his lens" upon a subject, it "disappear[s], leaving its fossil imprint in a Montreal furniture store" (147). He even goes so far as to speak of killing his subjects by taking pictures of them, especially if their final destination is somewhere in the East. The tangent East/West, and the commercialization of the West as heterotopia are exposed here, together with the myth of the vanishing Indian in this disappearing West. Minjus's photographs thus speak of the West as a performance, staged acts of the West demanded by the Eastern audience. Moreover, Minjus is revealed as the creator of the simulacrum of the Wild West myth, and of the stereotypical image of Indians, since he metaphorically kills whatever he captures in his photographs, leaving no original to compare with the copy.

In accordance with this demand for a certain kind of image and performance from the West and the Indians—and as an ironic underpinning in the novel—the two Indians are very much aware that the whites expect them to assume dignified and meditative poses. When they know no one is looking, sometimes they "are rather relaxed in [their] deportment" (Bowering 1987: 190), while at other times they maintain their performance. One such instance occurs near the end of the novel when the Indians, who have followed Caprice and Frank Spencer to see the final resolution of the narrative, are "sitting their ponies on the edge of a cliff, sitting perfectly still, so they would appear picturesque and what some people termed romantic" (246) to anyone who might be watching. It is, however, questionable that

[6] Curtis published a twenty-volume set, called *The North American Indian*. The myth of 'the vanishing Indian' was introduced by anthropologist Franz Boas, who collected oral stories from Native Americans through interviews, at the turn of the twentieth century. This myth soon became popular, and there are numerous artistic depictions of it: see, e.g. Christopher Lyman 1982, or Brian W. Dippie's texts, e.g. 2009: 45–51.

anyone would notice them, since they are positioned in such a way that "nobody with ordinary eyes would be likely to see them" (246). In other words, the whites for whom they perform are unable to spot them with their ordinary sight. Nonetheless, the Indians fulfill the roles assigned to them, keeping up the performance despite the fact that they are not the observed but the observers, assuming the position of spectators in a darkened theatre (they are situated in the shadow of a tree), watching the final showdown between Caprice and Frank Spencer. Their role not only in *Caprice* and the western genre, but also in the broader context of the settlement/invasion of the North American West, thus becomes dual; they are both performers and audience, sufferers of actions performed on them by the policy of colonization, and subjects with a small degree of agency in the history of white settlement/invasion.

On a much darker note, Bowering openly reminds the reader of the white supremacy ideology, which pushed the Aboriginal peoples to the brink of extinction, for "James Fenimore Cooper said earlier that the Red Man's duty was to die and leave the new lands to the energy of a superior race" (176). Simultaneously, this ideology created the nostalgic myth of the dying race, wherein the Indians were portrayed as unable to adapt to the new world, and consequently "predestined" for extinction. Thus British (and later Canadian and American) colonial policies of eradication of Native peoples are unmasked and exposed as a deliberate practice, and given a contrapuntal reading by other(ed) and ex-centric voices, who act as its clarifiers and interpreters. The puns and humour that the Indians employ in their teaching process and their commentary on the central plot are one such counter-narrative.[7]

Bowering further deconstructs the binary opposition of western cowboys and Indians by exploding the white chronological order of history, as the novel acknowledges and collects older presences and stories that take place in the region, near Kamloops, British Columbia. The phrase "take place" is relevant to Bowering's reinscription of the Interior Plateau, because the novel emphasizes the historicity of place and the idea of "history as embedded in locality" (Lutz 2004: 17), rather than mere chronology, a linear conception of events that occurred on a specific timeline. Bowering

[7] A concept that describes this counter-narrative is "survivance", introduced by Gerald Vizenor who defines it as "an active sense of presence over historical absence, the dominance of cultural simulations, and manifest manners. Native survivance is a continuance of stories" (2009: 1).

undertakes a "chronotopical approach" to history, which "locate[s] an event in the specific *locus* where it took place" (17, emphasis in the original). He creates an emotional and cognitive map of the place while retaining the literary code of the western genre, locating history in a specific place and re-creating an alternative to the official white history in the form of "a chronotope" (17). Thus "[i]nstead of 'when?' this approach to history would ask 'where?'" (17), tightly linking history with locality.[8] This chronotopical/chronological binary is exemplified by the older Indian, who reflects that

> [i]t was enough to be an old source of mystery in a land that was being crossed with steel rails and wagon roads and telegraph wires. Those things had introduced time-tables to the world. It was enough to be someone who could come and go according to irrational time. If a white man asked him how old he was he always replied: many moons. They liked that. (Bowering 1987: 246)

These two different philosophies are reflected here just as they are in the different conceptions of history. The notion of "irrational time" rejects the white unilinear segmentation of time into past–present–future in favour of a contemporaneity where there is no such division. This poses questions regarding the point of view from which the label is given, especially since irrational time is apparently opposed to the timetables of the supposedly rational world (again, by whose standards?). These two different conceptions of the world, reflected in the organization of time and the ideas of irrationality and rationalism, are present in the Indian's thoughts, because he is external and inward looking, able to perceive more than one history of time and place.

When applied to the structure of the novel, Bowering's strategy of tapinosis with its non-linear narrative serves as a "polysemic defence against the white man's fixation with linear order, literal understanding, and historical accuracy" (Garrett-Petts 1992: 566). His chronotopical approach, "typical for Indigenous North American oral traditions" (Lutz 2004: 17)

[8] Bowering further develops this chronotopical approach in his other western novel, *Shoot!* (1994), wherein he uncovers the little-known history of the McLean gang who lived in the Kamloops area, British Columbia, at the end of the 19th century. There the western genre of horse-thieves and gunslingers is dismantled to reveal the complex and poignant policy of settlement/invasion of the Interior Plateau territory, and of the aboriginal peoples, both the First Nations and Métis, who had no place in it. For analysis of this novel, see Sherill Grace, 2005. For analysis of the interconnection of time and space in Bowering's *Caprice*, see Kröller 1992: 110–111.

drives home the arbitrariness of chronology and linear order, underscoring the notion of irrational time considered by the older Indian. The novel's chronotopical emphasis can be further deduced from the times and places mentioned therein, including: fragments of histories (British, Native, European) from episodic character narratives; fragments of poetry (some written by Caprice, some excerpts from Goethe's *Faustus* and Mallarmé's poem "L'Apres-midi d'un Faune");[9] irrational and rational times (from Europe to the Americas); and the "then" time, when Caprice lived in Paris, and "was still a poet and not a fury" (Bowering 1987: 58), as opposed to the "now" time in which she is an avenger. Making chronological matters even more complex, Bowering constantly toys with the concepts of then and now, distinguishing between the narrated time and time of narration with constant interjections to the story such as "[n]ow, or rather a then that we call now" (38), and "[n]ow, or really a later then" (76), blurring the lines between the immediacy of narrated events and a later point in time when the narrator recounts these events. All these times and places ultimately converge into a specific chronotope of the Canadian West, a nodal point of action where both Bowering's revisions of history and genre lead to the revised western, which becomes the palimpsest of the New West in place of the single-perspective colonizing policy of the Old West.[10]

Caprice is placed in the North American Western landscape, the topos of the Wild West myth, physically and imaginatively removed from Eastern society and culture. As if this off-centeredness were not enough, Bowering

[9] For analysis of the intertext of Mállarme's poem in *Caprice*, see Colvile 2009.

[10] With its deconstruction of the typical western genre through multiple perspectives and fragmented narrative, and its use of historiographic metafiction to question and undermine the monolithic white history of the North American settlement of the West, Bowering's 1987 novel *Caprice* was a flagship for the new Canadian western. It was followed by award-winning texts of the same genre, such as Bowering's *Shoot!* (1994); Guy Vanderhaeghe's trilogy, comprising *The Englishman's Boy* (1996), *The Last Crossing* (2002) and *A Good Man* (2011); Native author Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993)—one of the most frequently cited examples of historiographic metafiction, which predominated Canadian postmodernism in the 1980s and 1990s; Fred Stenson's historical novel *Lightning* (2003); Aritha van Herk's series of new western short stories and fictocritical essays, such as "Leading the Parade" (2006), "Shooting a Saskatoon (Whatever Happened to the Marlboro Man?)" (2005), and "A Fondness for the Bay" (1998); and relatively recent acclaimed westerns, such as Patrick de Witt's *The Sisters Brothers* (2011) and Natalee Caple's *In Calamity's Wake* (2013). The tradition of the Canadian western was started at the turn of the 20th century by Ralph Connor (Charles William Gordon), the most famous Canadian novelist of his time, and writer of best-selling westerns *The Sky Pilot* (1899) and *The Prospector* (1904).

toys further with the concept of place: while the novel's action falls within the broad coordinates of the West, its actual setting is the British Columbia Interior, which does not geographically belong to the prairies (the area commonly perceived as the Wild West) but to the Rocky Mountains. Thus *Caprice*'s setting can be said to be in the margins of the margin, an under-represented part of the West, not only because it is in Canada rather than America, but because it is situated to the west of the (Wild) West. One can argue that Bowering's West functions as a heterotopia within a heterotopia, parallel to the mainstream Wild West. The distinction between the "central" and "off-center" West is demarcated here to break down the perceived uniformity of the Wild West myth, much as Bowering breaks down the monoglossia of white history through the introduction of multiple perspectives and narrative fragmentation, as well as the chronotopical approach.

Bowering, though, does not end his differentiation between American and Canadian West(s) here. While chasing her brother's murderer, Caprice maps out a large part of the North American western landscape, from British Columbia to New Mexico, across Nevada, Utah and Arizona, and repeatedly and freely crosses the 49th parallel that marks the boundary between Canada and the US. Despite the boundary's permeability—which might imply the homogeneity of the Wild West in the geographical region of the North American Prairies—by the end of the 19th century the international borderline "drawn across the northern plains had become an ideological line in peoples' minds, not just a mark on a map" (Thompson 2008: 38). Bowering shows that though the reality of living in the Canadian West may have been similar to that of the US, their ideologies were quite different. And while the US myth of the Wild West, formulated by Frederick Jackson Turner as the frontier thesis (1994), celebrated individualism, freedom and the enterprising spirit of the white man who created a new society out of the wilderness, removed from the evils of Eastern US and European civilizations, the Canadian version of national identity and the Wild West myth forged itself in opposition to this.

The distinction between the American Wild West and the Canadian so-called Mild West weaves through *Caprice* in numerous ways, frequently in stereotypical differences between Canada and the US. In fact, its differentiation between American and Canadian Wests makes *Caprice* a specifically *Canadian* western, just as its use of Wild West tropes make it a *western*. For instance, Canada is seen as peaceful, in opposition to the gun-toting perception of American society, so in the Canadian West guns

are not normally carried; even bushwhackers like Loop Groulx hide them under their coats when they go into town. There is less violence in general in the Canadian West: even fistfights are somehow less querulous, with no swearing or weapons involved, just two men punching each other in a quiet and orderly manner, in a bid for a hotel's last bed. Upon seeing this particular fistfight, Caprice reflects that "if this had been going on in one of the towns she had passed through in the past month or two someone would have discharged a revolver by now" (Bowering 1987: 53). Indeed, her own carrying of a bullwhip is in keeping with this distinction. When she does acquire a pistol, quite late in the novel, she calls it a "thing" for a long while, refusing to name it. She also refuses to buy an American gun, choosing a Luger instead, thus apparently rejecting American violence altogether.

Violence is seemingly introduced to the Canadian West by Americans, who cross the border to evade US lawmen and private investigators such as the Pinkertons. This is not to say that violence is absent from Canada. As Roy Smith exclaims when he tries to dissuade Caprice from her path of retribution, "[d]amn it, this is not Kansas, but it can be a violent land" (174). Rather, the Canadian West is generally more peaceful, with a quest for vengeance more rarity than rule in its collective imagination.

On the subject of violence, there is another significant feature of *Caprice* that differs from classic American westerns, and it lies in its narrative resolution: instead of climaxing in a dramatic shoot-out where the hero exacts his retribution, in *Caprice* the resolution comes in the form of Constable Burr, a representative of the Canadian law. As Frank Spencer and Caprice prepare to confront each other at Deadman Falls, the cliff collapses and Spencer ends up on a ledge, ten feet below. From the top of the cliff, Caprice disarms him with her bullwhip, and just as a tug-of-war is about to ensue—Spencer has grabbed the whip's fall, and intends to pull Caprice down and kill them both—Constable Burr appears and takes over. Ten months later, Spencer is executed in the Kamloops prison in the presence of the constable and the sheriff. So, although narrative tension is built around the anticipation of violence as Caprice rides "toward a showdown like any Yank scalp hunter" (216), in the end there is no bombastic resolution, or bloodshed and death in a hail of bullets (in fact not a single round is fired), but a peaceful and orderly conclusion that affirms Canada's precept of law and order.

A belief in the provincial legal system and institutionalized law enforcement—in the form of the North-West Mounted Police, or Mounties—is another feature of the Canadian Mild West. Known today as

the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, they are heroes of Canadian Western mythology in the same way that outlaws are the heroes of the American Wild West myth. However, the Mounties never garnered such excitement and emulation as did the American bandits Billy the Kid, Butch Cassidy, and the Sundance Kid.[11] Even Canadian children in *Caprice* play the version of cowboys and Indians from the south of the border because "[t]hey wanted to be heroes. They longed for myth" (143) which the Canadian lack of violence apparently could not engender. Frank Spencer deprecatingly exclaims that the Mounties are ineffectual against him, for in true desperado manner he "uses his six-shooter to settle problems about the just use and distribution of power" (Sisk 1987: 403). Loop Groulx, aware that in the West, outlaws have much more story-telling appeal than law-keepers, wants his face on a wanted poster. He says that once he and Spencer get famous, "folks will start to think of us as heroes. I mean like Jesse James and all…" to which Spencer counters,

> "Not up here in this goddamned country" … "Up here they think the goddamned Mounties are heroes. Cops!"
> "No, no. You dont [*sic*] understand the way we are up here. I mean all that Mountie stuff. That's just the government version. That's just what some … government people are trying to get across. I never heard of a kid yet that really thought the Mounties were heroes. No, everybody up here follows what's going on down there, 'cause that's where the books and songs comes [*sic*] from." (Bowering 1987: 220–21)[12]

Loop Groulx thus refers to American outlaws as role models, while Spencer disparages what he perceives as the inverted logic of Canadians, who respect the law instead of those who break it. However, in the end the long arm of justice reaches Spencer, who is not killed by a bullet, but by Canadian law. In Bowering's twist on a classic western, this is also reflected in Spencer's desire to be hanged in slippers, refusing to die in his boots, i.e. on the job. Consequently, the Canadian western reasserts itself as distinct

[11] The Sundance Kid's real name was Henry Longabaugh. He worked on the famous Bar U ranch south of Calgary in 1890, before riding South to become the Sundance Kid and join Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch gang.

[12] Mounties is an abbreviation of the North-West Mounted Police, who ensured law enforcement in Western Canada. Another point of difference between the US and Canada: in the US the army was tasked with keeping the peace, while in Western Canada this fell to the national police force. In 1920, the Mounties became part of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who are still active today.

from its US counterpart, reclaiming faith in law and order as its guiding principle, and showing that the American belief in "regeneration through violence" (Slotkin 2000) does not apply north of the 49th parallel.

The quoted paragraph introduces another difference between Canadian and American West: the notion of governmental influence and involvement in its settlment. While the US West developed in "the slower, sporadic, chaotic, and rugged path of classic frontier development" (Felske & Rasporich 2004: 3), Canadian Western development was an expansion of territory orchestrated by Central (i.e. Eastern) Canada, because it needed a colony from which to collect resources and to which to sell its products. Canada's settlement policy is best described by Canadian historian J. M. S. Careless, who was first to articulate the metropolitan thesis (2006), according to which Canada functioned as a series of metropolises that controlled the hinterland politically, culturally, socially and economically. This was achieved through the development of communications and transport systems between the metropolis/center and hinterland/province. When it was decided that the Canadian West would be populated, a railroad was built, and intense propaganda organized to attract European settlers. The First Nations were pushed into reserves after their lands were obtained through treaties, and arable land was divided into homesteads according to the Dominion Lands Act (similar to the US Homestead Act). It is important to note that the impetus for a quick and governmentally overseen settlement of the West was also strategically necessary, because Eastern Canada feared that the US would expand northward, into the Canadian prairies. It was this fear of the US as invader, coupled with the perceived chaos of settlement in the American West and its hero-worshipping of freedom and natural order, that played a large part in fostering the image of the US as villainous. Thus Caprice's arch-nemesis, American desperado Frank Spencer, mirrors the role of villain attributed in the Canadian West to the United States.

Regarding the process of organized population of the Canadian West and differentiation between the American Wild and Canadian Mild Wests, in *Caprice* Bowering discusses the colonial attitude the Canadian West retained towards its British imperial center at the end of the 19th century. British aristocrats and owners of large tracts of ranch land appear in the novel's background, pointing to the metropolitan policy behind the area's population, and revealing the different relationship Canada had with Britain. For while the ideology of the American Wild West was created through the severing of its ties with British civilization in order to forge a completely new

nation (Turner 1994), the Canadian East was more colonial in its worldview: it upheld British legal and societal systems, and invested in their replication in the Western provinces. In *Caprice* this is embodied in British aristocrat, H. P. Cornwall of the Manor, "someone generally more spoken of than seen in the town of which he possessed a considerable portion" (Bowering 1987: 262). This comment reflects the underlying British presence and ownership in the Dominion Lands of Canada, an element absent from the American West.

Differentiation between the American Wild and Canadian Mild Wests in *Caprice* occurs through the dyads of: violence and peacefulness; colonized and non-colonized frames of mind; frontier and metropolitan theses; and belief in a functional legal system in Canada and the lack thereof in the US. Bowering uses these binaries to observe critically the grand narrative of white settlement/invasion and its various reincarnations, one of which is the western genre. While retaining the stereotypical characters, plotlines, places and time of the western, he complements them with the aforementioned historical, cultural, political and economical facts of 19th century Western Canada. At the same time, he deconstructs the western genre not only by introducing multiple perspectives and fragmented narratives, a female protagonist, and an Indian perspective framing the central plot, but also by shifting the reader's focus, in postmodernist fashion, onto the process of textual production (Hutcheon 1988) through consistently laying bare myth-making itself.

Specifically, Bowering places metahistory in the foreground (White 1975), i.e. the constructedness of the Wild West myth through various stories which are deliberately created and distributed by characters who possess the power of narration: a photographer, a newspaper editor, and a foreign correspondent, to name but three. These fabricators, new arrivals to the West, are unmasked as Western myth-makers who shape the hi/story of the Wild West, emplotting it to cater to Eastern demands for entertainment. Photographer Archibald Minjus, whose lot in life was to invent the West as it disappeared into the past" (Bowering 1987: 147), is aware of his own complicity to this end, but nevertheless continues to produce its simulacrum for the Eastern market. Then there is the Austro-Hungarian magazine writer, Arpad von Kesselring, who introduces himself as a foreign correspondent and arrives in the West to collect stories to satisfy the curiosity of European readers. Kesselring's strategy is deliberate invention: "[i]n his dispatches he often made things up, and in fact the parts he made up were quite frequently the best parts" (93). He walks around

with a notebook and fountain pen, looking for "authentic western outlaws" (105). He also attempts to interview Caprice, and when she resists tries to mollify her by explaining the transformative processes facts undergo in his writing, and of her story consequently becoming a "legend", "history", and having "most important, perhaps, … romance" (171). Being European, Kesselring serves as a metonymy for the global popularity of the Wild West myth, its audiences hungry for the wilderness and freedom of the frontier, but in a form they can enjoy from the safety of their armchairs. The third example of the Wild West myth-maker is Cyril Trump, an "old skunk from England who called himself editor and publisher" (179), and who openly reveals that he is in control of the public: he "want[s] to tell people in the western … parts … what they think about things that are going on [t]here" (182). Trump does not disguise his manipulation of facts and their subsequent fabulation, for he claims to know only what he reads in the newspapers (which he publishes). In so doing, he basks in his power as a God-like Author (Barthes 1977). It can be seen that all three of these myth-makers are directly responsible for the creation of the heterotopia of the Wild West. Through their visual and verbal texts the metropolitan East once again colonizes the West, this time through mis-information and mis-representation; Bowering shows how colonization of a territory works on the level of language and narrative as well as on the level of actual invasion and settlement. In Minjus, Kesselring and Trump's hi/stories the emphasis is not on their authentic or veracious accounts, but on the mythopoeic stories of the West as an imagined chronotope.

Bowering furthermore stresses that the process of transforming the western reality into myth has also had return effects. The process of narrativization (Jameson 1981) of the West in *Caprice* is shown perhaps most explicitly in the following paragraphs, which emphasize its entrenchment in the past and the inevitable encroachment of the East, which paradoxically demands western stories:

> By the 1890s the west had started to shrink. … Out in the west the west was also, by the 1890s, becoming the past. … It became more clear all the time that the future was getting ready to move in, and the future of the west was going to be the east. … the west was… slipping from the land into the landscape of stories about the west. It was becoming a style in eastern theatres and those theatres were beginning to show up in the west, and the west was now on the stage and in books and in songs instead of out the front door or on the rail this afternoon.
>
> …

> Already in the 1890s there were stories of the old west. The mood that ran through them was nostalgic regret. But they were printed back east and arrived on the train from Montreal or New York. (Bowering 1987: 108–109)

The metahistory of the creation of the Wild West myth is described here, as are the relationships along the East-West tangent. The West shrinks, is exported to the East where it becomes a story, a style in Eastern theatres; it stops being perceived as real life and becomes a performance, a created myth. In this state, it returns to the West and changes Western realities, which are consequently written over, "slipping from the land into the landscape of stories about the west". Under such invasion of its narrative, the West as a reality gives way to the performance of the West, which becomes the dominant practice, ultimately disconnecting the signifier from the signified.

Thus the metafictional dimension of the novel debunks the simulated objectiveness and neutral rendering of facts that the grand narrative of Western history purports to provide, and the western genre stereotypically maintains. In the well-known words of Patricia Waugh, metafiction "simultaneously … create[s] a fiction and … make[s] a statement about the creation of that fiction" (1984: 6), and Bowering does just that: he creates a specifically Canadian western while placing metanarrative processes in the foreground not only of his own novel but in broader Western history and colonial policies. The novel's metanarrative dimension functions in the same way as the emplotment processes of myth-making and the metahistorical creations of historiography. At the same time, Bowering relies on western stereotypes to place the whole genre of the western—the by-product of this myth-making practice—in the foreground. He observes it critically, and transforms its narrative from one-dimensional to multiple, which, in combination with the use of heteroglossia, creates a new, self-reflexive and multi-layered Canadian western. Bowering reconstructs the genre by writing a parody which both undermines and relies on its literary codes, breaking down "the distinctions between 'creation' and 'criticism' and merg[ing] them into the concepts of 'interpretation' and 'deconstruction'" (Waugh 1984: 6). With his novel, Bowering achieves a postmodern and postcolonial rewriting of the classic western genre and myth.[13]

[13] In relation to Waugh's quote used here and the discussion of *Caprice* as historiographic metafiction, the author is aware that this statement, when made today in relation to postmodern novels of the 1980s and 1990s, may seem obvious, but at the time it was the defining trait of a flourishing movement in Canadian and, more broadly, Western

To conclude, *Caprice* simultaneously represents the western and its subversion; it is a text that can best be labelled as a meta-western, since it deconstructs the mythopoeia of the Wild West by revealing the processes of the myth's creation in the East, and its subsequent materialization in the West. The subversion of the genre functions by introducing an atypical protagonist, and refocusing the optics by: introducing multiple focalizers with varying levels of insight into the novel's (hi)story; differentiating between Canadian and American Wests; fragmenting the narrative; playing with different notions of time and place; manipulating western tropes such as the concepts of cowboy, Indian, and the West; and, most of all, by introducing a metafictional level to the novel. All these strategies employed by Bowering in *Caprice* broaden the genre's scope, offering a contrapuntal reading of white history as represented by the most masculine and nation-forming myth: that of the Wild West.

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literature. Hutcheon's books on postmodernism and historiographic metafiction, which have canonic status in the establishment of postmodern theory (e.g. *Canadian Postmodern*; *Poetics* and *Politics of Postmodernism*), coincide with the publication of the primary texts of Canadian historiographic metafiction, like Bowering's *Caprice*. Hence the mention in this article of a commonplace concept serves to underline this historical moment in the primary production of historiographic-metafictional texts as well as of the subsequent formulation of its theory.

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